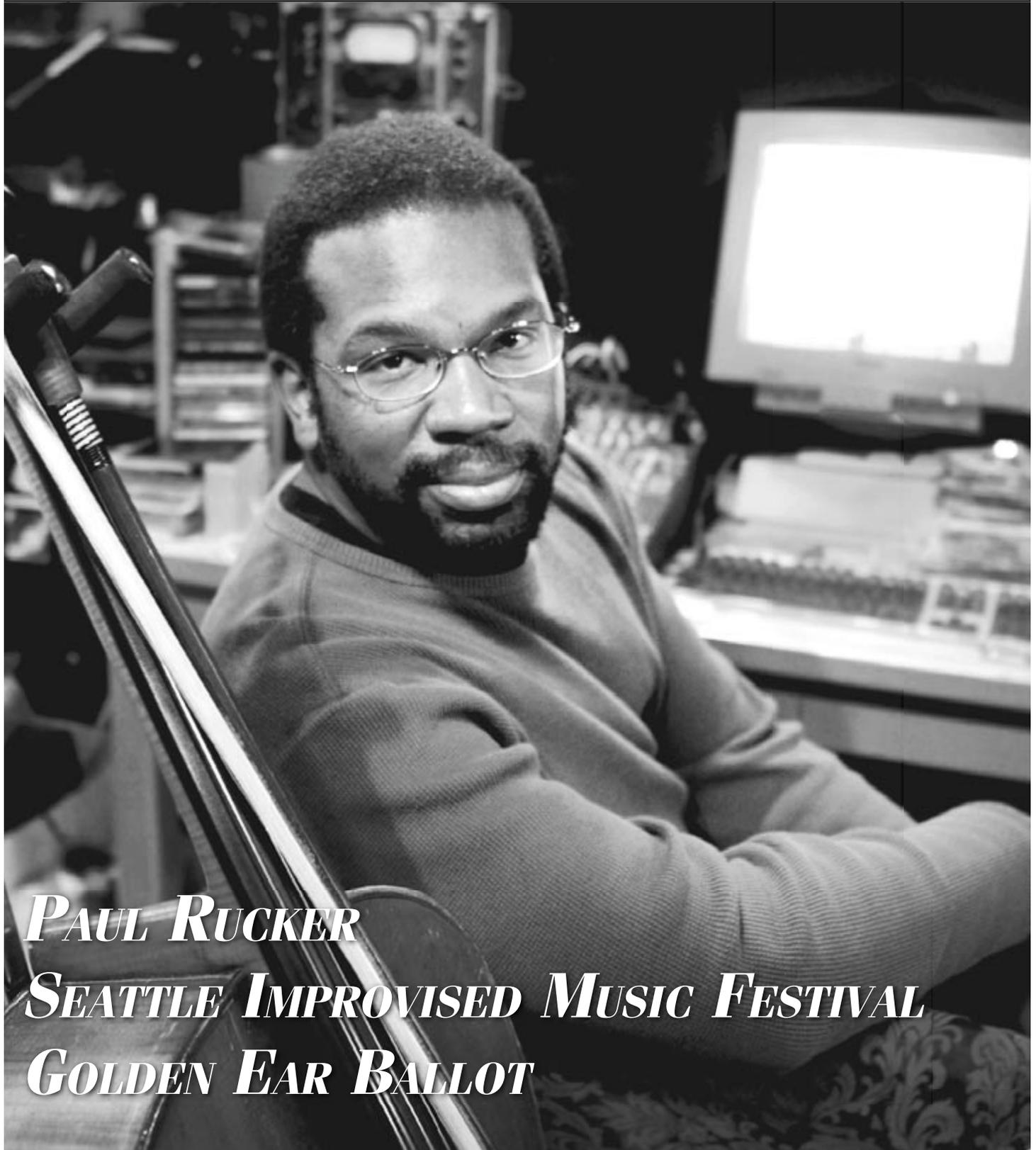


*A Mirror
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PAUL RUCKER

SEATTLE IMPROVISED MUSIC FESTIVAL

GOLDEN EAR BALLOT

Paul Rucker: Mapping the Future

BY PETER MONAGHAN

In 1997, Paul Rucker took out a map of the United States and “I decided to find the best cities, the ones that were conducive to what I wanted to do.”

Rucker, a bassist, cellist, and composer of impressive ambition, capability, and intelligence, has been demonstrating over the last several months that Seattle was a fortunate choice. The rain and the hills clearly agree with him, judging by the two recordings he released last year on his own Jackson Street Records which, he has shown, is capable of releasing assured, and well-produced music from a basement equipped with only a Macintosh G3 and a very modest array of attached hardware and software.

His two releases, *History of an Apology* and *Oil*, seem likely to be only the first of many outstanding projects from Rucker, now in his mid-30s, and in town from his native South Carolina for six years.

Before deciding on his move to the Northwest, says the quiet-spoken, thoughtful, and affable Rucker at his Central District studio, he monitored the local arts scene and rent situation via the weeklies. In the listings, he saw names like Bill Frisell and Wayne Horvitz, and “I thought, if this is happening in Seattle, maybe that’s the place for me to be.”

It had been Frisell’s now too-little-remembered album, *Rambler*, that had “inspired me to try to create my own voice,” he says. “I found it in a cut-out bin. I recognized that he was a great arranger. I listened to *Lookout For Hope*, and the more I listened the more I realized he had a distinctive sound, and I realized I wanted to have that, too.”

Apology and *Oil* demonstrate that he has succeeded in dazzling fashion. They are all the more remarkable given that they are his first full-fledged jazz projects. He began creating his own music and privately recording it when he was 15, but Anderson, South Carolina, had no recording studios, so until he managed to cut a few tracks while at the University of South Carolina, in Columbia, he had to content himself with taping at home.

When he moved out here, he at first kept to himself. In fact, he also was taking a two-year break from playing. But he began preparing for his current releases almost immediately, by listening as widely as he could, and getting to know musicians whose work appealed to him.

In 1998, at the Baltic Room one day, he met Bill Frisell and gave him a copy of some of his music — and found him both far more approachable and far less intimidating than he had expected from Frisell’s own sometimes



dark, often intense music. That encounter bears fruit on *Apology*: Frisell contributes a fine, searing solo.

Rucker also met trombone icon Julian Priester, who also appears on *Apology*, as well as other local luminaries. And he slowly built his base.

While working as a janitor at the Seattle Art Museum, he met Josie Howell, the extraordinary vocalist who is featured briefly on the album. He met other players on his album through a variety of connections, and after returning to playing — rustily. “If you don’t

practice for five or six months, you really feel the pain,” he admits. While working for 18 months as a security officer at Cornish College of the Arts, for example, he met Brazilian keyboard great, Jovino Santos Neto — at a yoga class. (While working for the college, he also took the opportunity to take a vocal class with Beth Winter and a jazz-arranging course with Jim Knapp.)

On each of the *History of an Apology*’s carefully constructed and layered tracks, Rucker has relied on a core group of fine Seattle players, including saxophonist Hans Teuber, who is as dependable a collaborator as any in the city. Rucker’s ambition requires highly accomplished players who are ready and able to contribute to the fine details that make all the difference in bringing to life the themes of the album. The album, which appeared last April, responds to the infamous Tuskegee Experiment in which, between 1932 and 1972, the U.S. Public Health Service conducted a heinous experiment on 600 African American men, 399 in the late stages of syphilis, and 201 in a control group. The men who were infected with the disease, most of them illiterate sharecroppers in Alabama, were left untreated so that researchers could monitor the gruesome course of their disease.

Apology was not a project that Rucker would have been likely to entrust to just anyone. “They’re a collection of the people I enjoyed watching when I first moved here, during my first three years,” and then others he met later. “All of the people I played with on the CD, they don’t just play well, I got good energy from them, and I respect them a lot.”

The respect clearly is mutual. “I really had a good time working with him. He’s really a creative musician,” says Bill Frisell. “He has a deep understanding of and openness to all kinds of music. I think this really comes across on the recording I did with him. I think it’s so great how he brought together so many people from all over the Seattle

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music community and turned it into his own unique thing. He's cool."

The variety of instrumentation is sonically rich, attention-catching, and above all expressive. Among other Northwest-based players heard on Rucker's eight compositions are guitarist Bill Horist; trumpeter Jay Roulston ("wow!" Rucker says of him); accordionist Amy Denio; trombonists Jeff Hay and Neil Gitkind; percussionists Jeff Busch and Erik Anderson; flutist Isaac Marshall; electric bassist Farko Dosumov; piercingly plaintive vocalists Flora McGill and Josephine Howell; drummer Jacques Willis; and conga player Elizabeth Pupo-Walker, whose time, variety, and feel have become acclaimed all around town.

Then came guest soloists whom Rucker selected for a variety of well-calculated expressive effects, including Bill Frisell on the title track, and Julian Priester. Another legend, Michael White, contributes his highly seasoned violin to a few pieces. Jovino Santos Neto solos most effectively on the little-used melodica.

The ensemble creates pieces that are often somber and pained, yet also austere dignified and resolute. The music's exact references to the shameful Tuskegee incident are not directly apparent, yet the album runs deep with a complex sense of delving into a terrible, mournful history. *Apology* is, then, far from a recitation of standard jazz forms; it is carefully considered and beautifully conveyed.

Rucker has cogently conveyed his intentions to his able crew. But he insists that he equally received telling advice from them. For example: "Don't go into the recording studio with too many set notions of what you want to lay down, because something really beautiful might just fly by you." Some of the best takes, he says, resulted "when I just shut my mouth."

Bill Horist was most helpful, Rucker says. He is best-known for encountering his electric guitar with whatever tackle comes to hand. For *Apology*, says Rucker, he tirelessly sought better chordal structures, and much else. "He's a real character, and he was one of the hardest workers on this project."

And there was a lot of work. Rucker spent two years getting the recording together, working on ideas, getting studio time, and obtaining some funding through a grant from what was then the King County Arts Commission.

Of course, having Hans Teuber, the city's ultimate jazz professional, on board, helped all the way. Rucker's acquaintance with him goes back to his college days in South Carolina, where he studied composition with Teuber's father.

The reach and intensity of Rucker and Teuber's musical communication is apparent on the second Jackson Street Records release of last year, *Oil*, a set of nine outstanding improvised pieces with Rucker on cello and Teuber on alto saxophone.

Teuber has access to both the conventions of jazz and a vault of expressions of his own heart and mind. Rucker is right there with him. Captivatingly oblique and sonically free, they sound out the raw edges of conventional sonorities amid moments of simple, plain statement. The album opens, for example, with a spare, thoughtful, gentle, deeply felt piece that displays, like *History*, Rucker's winning assurance. In that, Teuber ably collaborates. Neither musician is interested in indulging in anything flashy; rather, their contributions are exploratory, searching quietly for pockets of wonder in each other's reactions.

The result is a compelling album that meanders into spaces of transporting strangeness.

Not too many musicians who are capable of such aesthetic subtlety are able to then turn around and take care of the business end of the business. But Rucker is giving notice that he can. With Jackson Street Records, he pursues a self-help approach, tirelessly advocating for the work that he and his small stable of fellow musicians publish.

"This is a one-person operation," he notes, as he shows his space, which is in an artists' coop that he helped set up. One side of his basement studio is packed with his several stringed instruments — basses, guitars, cello, and assorted others. His recording and production equipment is along the other wall. There's barely room for the only other essential — a bed. No point in paying two rents; that's a tenet of the scrabbling jazz life.

Upstairs, in a second space that he shares with a graphic artist, Rucker says: "The rest of it is just me in this room here, sending out things." In the cramped quarters, he manages to maintain enough order that he can efficiently dispatch a hundred promotional packets or more each month, as far afield as the Netherlands, Spain, Austria, all over. Jackson Street's website (jacksonstreetrecord.com) is drawing fan mail from as far away as Manchester and Macedonia. A couple of

friends helped Rucker design the site, along with his album covers, although Rucker has plenty of design skills, himself, and is in fact an accomplished visual artist, too.

Internet sales of *Apology* and *Oil* are going well, aided in part by some airplay over local radio stations with internet broadcasts. With any luck, they'll increase this year if he can organize a tour to Canadian jazz festivals, and hopefully to locations in Europe. Resourcefulness is a quality that Rucker traces to the musician who would appear to be at least as much his inspiration as any other — about whom, at least, he waxes warmly: his mother. As he grew up in South Carolina, she taught herself to play the organ through mail-order courses from something called the US School of Music (which still exists).

"A lesson a week," Rucker says. His mother slowly, doggedly learned pieces, and then, in 1979, held a recital at her church. "It was on a stage built especially, and there were flowers all around," he recalls. He was 9, and clearly the event made an impression on him.

At about that time, he was beginning to learn bass at his public school; he continued lessons all through high school. He played his first paid gig at 13: a local theater production of *Man of La Mancha*. "It was very difficult because of the mixed meters," he remembers.

When he was in the 11th grade, Rucker got to know Chris Potter, the stellar saxophonist now with Dave Holland's quintet. Potter was then in 8th grade, and the two played together in an all-state jazz band. ("He played my first, early arrangements, of pop music," says Rucker.) Also in the band was Ronald Westray, who went on to the Lincoln Center Jazz Orchestra, Wynton Marsalis's band, and related outfits.

Rucker stayed close to home for college because his father, a coal miner in Virginia, had developed cancer, which he survived for three years. Attending the university in Columbia had an upside. He met Hans Teuber, who was playing all around the city.

But even through college, Rucker had far from settled on a jazz career. During his freshman year, at 18, he played with the South Carolina Philharmonic Orchestra. He later performed with the Augusta Symphony and the Martha's Beach Symphony. "People called us in for community orchestras. On weekends, we'd come in to play with already rehearsed musicians."

To say Rucker was "classically trained," however, hardly does justice to the way he

came up, and he is no fan of the term. He and fellow college musicians would go all over the state, playing not just for symphony orchestras and opera companies, but also productions of stage musicals, and for bluegrass shows. He majored, in fact, in jazz, commercial music, and composition, and he stomped for the marching band. If it was music, it seemed, he would play it. In addition to all the other gigs, he was at times in as many as four jazz combos. He played straight-ahead jazz — standards and the like — in local restaurants, making \$50 to \$60 a night. “In the ’80s, there was a shortage of bass players,” he recalls, “and if you could just hold one up, you’d get plenty of work. The advantage of South Carolina over New York was that in New York there were a lot of people willing to work, but pay ridiculous rents.”

And, then, with all the classical work, he says, “I could make two to three hundred a weekend. At 18, if you’re making that, you’re in paradise.”

All kinds of sounds filtered through to his evolving aesthetic. One of his playing activities was in free improvisation. At first, he says, “I didn’t know what that was. We just got together and played.”

It was all very mind-expanding, he recalls. “At that time I didn’t know who Sun Ra was, or Mingus...”

In 1994, he played piccolo bass, electric bass, and sang on a rock recording with drummer John Blackwell, who is now with Prince.

He was gaining a profound, broad grasp of music, he was rehearsing every day, and traveling out of town.

“I was playing too much,” he admits. Burnout hit in 1998. He stopped playing altogether. But by then he had set his course for Seattle, where his musical quest would revive.

There is one thing about Seattle music that Paul Rucker does not like, and he doesn’t hesitate to make it plain, although in the most soft-spoken, unprovocative way: Most music is presented here as if it is table scraps tossed in with a dog’s dinner. “I rarely play out because I don’t like playing really late, and I don’t want to be background music. I want to be listened to.” He prefers all-ages venues, and non-smoking ones. “Bars just kill my self-esteem. And a lot of venues don’t want to pay very much.”

Pay is the same here as it was when he was 18 in college in South Carolina. “Until they increase the pay for entertainment, they don’t deserve entertainment.”

Thank goodness someone is saying it out loud. A weird thing about Seattle jazz is that most musicians don’t want to publicize how little they make, for fear that some club owner will realize that they could get away with paying even less than they do.

But Rucker has no doubts: “We sell ourselves short when we say my quartet will play for three to four hours and get paid \$100.”

So, he plays live shows rarely, perhaps just four or five a year, including occasionally accompanying silent movies with his free-improv quartet, which includes trombonist Neil Gitkind.

The upside of his holding out is that every one of his performances can become “something special.” When he played with Hans Teuber and drummer Byron Vannoy at the Seattle Art Museum’s lobby space late last year, for example, he and his bandmates managed to bring out a couple of hundred people, thanks to email and some radio appearances on KBCS and KEXP. (He and Hans Teuber will appear again on the latter on Saturday, March 20, at 11pm, on Doug Haire’s excellent Sonarchy Radio Hour.)

Taking encouragement where he finds it, Rucker pushes ahead. His goal: “Just to do what I enjoy without anyone else telling me what to do.” He doesn’t want to give control up to any of the “market forces” that impose such judgments as “too out there.”

But he does have a business plan, which involves “keeping expenses down, and selling steadily,” as well as getting the word out to as much of the world as he can contact in the age of the Internet.

Soon, he’ll record a trio album with Hans Teuber and Byron Vannoy, as well as a disc of duets involving players who don’t often work together. (He’ll put out a call for submissions this year.)

Also in the plans is a project with string quartet and jazz quartet, and an anthology of music that he has created over the last 20 years, beginning at age 15.

And he is looking to record musicians like vocalist Josie Howell, with her extraordinary range and power. “I’m open to anything,” he says. “It’s not about units you can sell. I want to enjoy working with you.”

This month, Paul Rucker appears on cello at the Seattle Improvised Music Festival in violinist Tari Nelson-Zagar’s quartet, Thingsome Q, with violinist Tom Swafford, and New York violist Tara Flandreau.

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